

Coming Ashore: Graeme Wynn and the Canadian Landscape

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*“For almost forty years I have sought to understand
the human transformation of the earth.”*

This straightforward, down-to-earth statement occupies a single line in the expansive *curriculum vitae* of Graeme Wynn. Both declaration and document record the foundation and achievements of a career that might not have been, if it were not for the stringent requirements of becoming a master mariner, Graeme’s first career choice. But to the great benefit of Canadian historical geography, and of Canadian Studies in general, a slight deviation from the essential requirement of a ship’s captain to possess “20/20” eyesight cast Graeme adrift, only to come ashore in Canada, where he set about pursuing MA and PhD studies at the University of Toronto. After a sojourn in New Zealand, he returned to Canada to take up a position in geography at the University of British Columbia. From this base, Graeme has developed an international scholarly reputation of the highest standing.

Graeme was well-schooled at the University of Toronto in the late 1960s and early 1970s. His mentors were the historical geographers Jim Lemon and Cole Harris, and a historian, Craig Brown. Here, he spurned the avant-garde—the quantitative revolution in geography—to find favor with a more holistic geography that embraced, as widely as possible, the interplay between land, society, and history. The physical environment, the migration of Europeans overseas, population dynamics, ethnicity, family life, the settlement process, the waxing and waning of regional economies, the politics of dependency, the conservation of the natural environment—these are but a few of the themes that have captured the imagination of an incisive, voracious mind that is always in search of the wider landscape significance of the commonplace, and of everyday occurrences.¹

In researching Canada’s past—its evolving, ever-changing landscapes—Graeme’s geographical inquiries have ranged widely, from farmstead, village, town, and city to local area, parish, county, colony–province, hinterland region, and nation-state. No recent century has escaped his attention. He is equally comfortable and skilled in discussing and interpreting events of the eighteenth century as he is of the nineteenth, twentieth, and twenty-first centuries. In his pursuit of a deeper understanding of Canada’s geographical past, Graeme has cultivated a research strategy that blends the use of rich archival sources and meaningful theoretical principles to explain the shaping of the Canadian landscape. And as his historical scholarship matured and evolved, he has delved deftly into other humanistic realms for scholarly inspiration, probing the art, literature, and music of Canada in search of a telling metaphor that will underpin a narrative of time and space.

The die of Graeme’s lifelong research strategy was cast on the Tantramar Marshes more than four decades ago. This borderland region between present-day Nova Scotia and New Brunswick in the Maritimes region of Canada was, in the mid-eighteenth century, a distinctive landscape of imperial conflict (France vs. England), of the mixing of cultural groups (Acadians,

New Englanders, Yorkshiremen, and Loyalists), of the impact of diking technology on natural resource development, of early conservation strategies, and of the importance of an early staple trade (hay) to the economic advance of a small hinterland region. To Graeme's great credit, the themes of this master's thesis were contextualized by the political economy of a mercantile world and the trans-Atlantic and inter-regional movement of people to this outpost of empire.² As a measure of the lasting worth of this early research, the Tantramar Heritage Trust, based in Sackville, New Brunswick and possessors of a thriving publishing arm, asked Graeme to revisit his early research and comment in a thoughtful, critical way about its lasting influence and relevance for modern conservation strategies. The result is a handsome monograph and a reflective essay, "Of Time and Tides," that introduces new ideas based on recently unearthed archival sources.³

Smitten by the diversity of research possibilities offered by the Maritimes region—of the "human transformation" of this east-coast, hinterland region—Graeme took on the herculean effort of investigating, for his doctoral dissertation, the timber trade of colonial New Brunswick, a staple trade par excellence.⁴ It was herculean in the sense that in order to research the topic, Graeme's first task was to bring order to a chaotic archive of colonial records held by the New Brunswick Museum in Saint John. In the 1960s and 1970s, bona fide researchers, once their "spurs were earned," were allowed into the stacks of regional archives to search for musty nuggets that would set them along a vein of rich archival treasures. The result was certainly golden: an award-winning book, *Timber Colony: A Historical Geography of Early Nineteenth Century New Brunswick*. Some of the book's themes were already part of his research repertoire—population and settlement, land and livelihood, economic transformation—but others were newly considered: family history, entrepreneurship, dependency theory, and government regulation.⁵

Graeme's research has never been bound by theory; rather, explanation has emerged by answering questions that arise from drawing out, inductively, the possibilities of explanation presented by a full array of empirical evidence. Questions that could not be answered with full certainty remained as a spur to subsequent research and publication—viz., from his doctoral work, articles on environmental degradation caused by the over-exploitation of the pine forests of New Brunswick.⁶ Incidentally, here were sown the seeds of an initial, effective foray into the environmental history of Canada, with full reward to be reaped several decades later. This is one of the distinguishing marks of Graeme's research strategy: he has the great ability to recognize the potential worth and long-term usefulness of primary research materials.

Here's another example of this strategy: while researching the timber trade, Graeme explored settler society from several perspectives, one of which was the family economy and life course of early Scottish families in the Kennebecasis River valley of southern New Brunswick, especially several generations of the Robertson family. Genealogies were searched, as were nominal census returns, and much factual information was recorded. But information on such things as the actual place of birth in Scotland and the characteristics of that place, and the eventual destination of out-migration to the United States and New Zealand, were put to one side, but only for the time being. Almost a decade later, the Robertsons would be examined in greater detail, incorporating new archival materials gained from a research trip to their cultural hearth in Scotland and while on sabbatical leave in the antipodes. Only then could the material be addressed in a more meaningful way by placing these New Brunswick family histories within the context of the trans-oceanic movements of settler societies.⁷

A purely "local," micro-analysis has never sufficed for Graeme, even when it seems, at first glance, that interpreting the geographical character of a local landscape is the primary research objective. In research carried out in the 1980s, this appeared to characterize Graeme's investigation of mid-nineteenth century Hardwood Hill, a small, Scottish immigrant farming community in rural Pictou County. Familiar sources were tapped, including census, land, and

marriage records. But the study's essential research question—what was the response of farm families to broad technological, economic, reformist, and regulatory forces affecting agricultural practice?—meant looking for answers well beyond Hardwood Hill and Pictou County. Local records were blended with a broad knowledge of mid-nineteenth century farming technologies, colonial government policies regarding trade in agricultural products, the religious divide within the Presbyterian Church, emerging thoughts on the conservation of soils, and so much more. We soon learn why Hardwood Hill stands as the exemplar of something much larger in scope: people who took leading roles in agricultural reform had either close ties to, or deep familial roots in, Hardwood Hill and Pictou County. Knowing this, of course, depended on a continuous effort to read widely and probe deeply into untapped archives, not just for primary data, but also for long-forgotten published secondary sources of the mid-nineteenth century.⁸

A source developed years before might not have direct application for current research, but more likely than not, will be used in future writing.⁹ On Graeme's "to do list" is a book that will examine the peopling of British North America from the late-eighteenth century down to Confederation. Its completion will make recourse to the on-going, painstaking collection of population data. To wit, Graeme's broad, synthetic survey of the population dynamics of the Maritime colonies from the late eighteenth century down to the mid-nineteenth century has already resulted in multiple applications. Where did those people come from? How did the makeup of population change over time? How were local economies related to population dynamics? This research has already led to benchmark articles in geographical journals and a major contribution of several plates to separate volumes of the Historical Atlas of Canada.¹⁰ These cartographic efforts reveal Graeme's passionate belief in the power of maps. Maps can serve as the starting point for asking research questions; maps establish a spatial context for historical analyses; and maps reveal much about regional character. Rest assured, "The Peopling of British North America Project" will bear witness to the utility of maps and long-retrieved historical data.

It comes as no surprise, then, that Graeme was called upon by several editors in the late-1980s and 1990s to contribute major, synthetic essays to studies of Canada's regional geography and its history. Several well-known books—(1) *Heartland and Hinterland: A Geography of Canada*, (2) *The Illustrated History of Canada*, and (3) *North America: The Historical Geography of a Changing Continent*—bear witness to his creative scholarly abilities. In the order of this list, Graeme's expertise, creative mind, and pen flow freely along a trajectory from the Maritimes to Central Canada and then "out" west, offering spatio-temporal interpretations of Canada's history and changing landscape. Besides their geographical value, these are major contributions to Canadian Studies, offering insights and knowledge of a broadly based humanistic and inter-disciplinary kind.¹¹

Yes, "out" west. As a colleague of the well-established and senior historical geographer Cole Harris at the University of British Columbia, Graeme cast his research eye towards regions and places other than Quebec and British Columbia, the domain of his mentor's enquiries. As others have noted, Graeme is alone among Canada's geographers to have contributed meaningfully and in depth to the historical geography of the antipodes. But British Columbia has called out for Graeme's attention, and he responded by writing about the urban landscape—about neighborhoods and city landscapes. With his University of British Columbia colleague Tim Oke, a climatologist, Graeme co-edited *Vancouver and Its Region*, a study that embraced both physical and human geography.

For this book, Graeme wrote about the evolution of Vancouver's landscape, producing a lengthy essay, a masterly synthesis titled "The Rise of Vancouver."¹² And so he should have, for he has taught a course on the historical dimensions of cities and happily guided students, visitors, and others across the fascinating landscapes of this West Coast metropolis. One of the charms of

this essay is the way that Graeme again employs a micro-analysis to elucidate broader themes, this time of one neighborhood, the Dunbar area in Point Grey. In this case, the compilation of street directory, assessment, and other primary information encompassed his “home turf,” the neighborhood where he actually resides in Vancouver. Like Hardwood Hill and Pictou County, the choice is astute. Personal observations made over several decades are married with essential empirical facts and city-wide planning and other studies to recount the historical urban geography of Vancouver’s economy, society, and landscape.

Canada’s urban landscape comes into view at other times in Graeme’s writing, most notably in a well-received, authoritative book, *Canada and Arctic North America: An Environmental History*, in which several chapters are devoted to explaining how planning principles and practices of conservation and sustainability are associated with, for example, the spread of suburbs, the utility of urban parks, and the densification of cities.¹³ On another “urban” occasion, an essay on the working-class character of East End Vancouver neighborhoods was co-authored to appear in a collection of essays edited by Graeme, *People, Places, Patterns, Processes: Geographical Perspectives on the Canadian Past*.¹⁴ Importantly, this book confirmed Graeme’s editorial talents, which have included stints as co-editor of the *Journal of Historical Geography* (2006-12), editor of *BC Studies: The British Columbia Quarterly* (2008ff), and general editor of books published by UBC Press in its “Nature–History–Society” series (2005ff). The number of titles in this series is fast approaching the 20 mark, which means that the readers of these books have also been given the opportunity to read a thought-provoking “Foreword” to each book, which together comprise a substantive essay written by Graeme that establishes a wider appreciation for the books. These essays fall within the scope of one or several fields of inquiry – historical geography, environmental history and Canadian studies in general – and in each field Graeme is recognized, through awards and executive positions, as a leader.

Like an ocean current that ebbs and flows, bringing change, the “tides of time” can wash ashore something of singular importance, far from its point of original departure. With 20/20 hindsight, it is easy to recognize the many outstanding contributions that Graeme has made to many spheres of influence since coming ashore, almost a half-century ago: research, teaching, administration, and community and professional service.

Notes

- 1 See the autobiographical comments that form part of the “Distinguished Historical Geography Lecture, 2012” of the Historical Geography Specialty Group, Association of American Geographers, which was published as Graeme Wynn, “‘Tracing one Warm Line Though a Land so Wide and Savage’: Fifty Years of Historical Geography in Canada,” *Historical Geography* 40 (2012): 5-32. Also useful is Graeme Wynn, “Thinking About Mountains, Valleys and Solitudes: Historical Geography and the New Atlantic History,” *Acadiensis* 31 (2001): 129-45.
- 2 Graeme Wynn, “The Utilization of the Chignecto Marshlands of Nova Scotia and New Brunswick, 1750-1850,” MA thesis, Department of Geography, University of Toronto, 1969. See also Graeme Wynn, “Late-Eighteenth Century Agriculture on the Bay of Fundy Marshlands,” *Acadiensis* 8 (1979): 80-89.
- 3 Graeme Wynn, *Culture and Agriculture on the Tantramar Marshes* (Sackville, NB: Tantramar Heritage Trust, 2012).
- 4 Graeme Wynn, “The Assault on the New Brunswick Forest, 1780-1850” (PhD dissertation, Department of Geography, University of Toronto, 1974).

- 5 Graeme Wynn, "Administration in Adversity: Deputy Surveyors and Control of the New Brunswick Crown Forest Before 1844," *Acadiensis* 7 (1977): 49-65; and Graeme Wynn, "'Deplorably Dark and Demoralized Lumberers'?: Rhetoric and Reality in Early Nineteenth Century New Brunswick," *Journal of Forest History* 24 (1980): 158-87; and Graeme Wynn, "Moving Goods and People in Mid-Nineteenth Century New Brunswick," *Canadian Papers in Rural History* 6 (1988): 226-39.
- 6 "'A Share of the Necessities of Life': Remarks on Migration, Development and Dependency in Atlantic Canada," (The 1986 Winthrop Pickard Bell Lecture in Maritime Studies), in *Beyond Anger and Longing: Community and Development in Atlantic Canada*, ed. Berkley Fleming (Fredericton, NB: Acadiensis Press, 1988), 17-55.
- 7 Graeme Wynn, "This Dark Vale of Sorrow," *Nova Scotia Historical Review*, 6 (1986): 55-62; Graeme Wynn, "Nova Scotian Agriculture in the 'Golden Age': A New Look," in *Geographical Perspectives on the Maritime Provinces*, ed. Douglas Day (Halifax: St. Mary's University Press, 1988), 47-59; Graeme Wynn, "'Exciting a Spirit of Emulation Among the Plodholes': Agricultural Reform in Pre-Confederation Nova Scotia," *Acadiensis* 20 (1990): 5-51; and Graeme Wynn, Rusty Bitterman, and Robert MacKinnon, "Of Inequality and Interdependence in the Nova Scotian Countryside," *Canadian Historical Review* 74 (1993): 1-43.
- 8 Graeme Wynn, "New Brunswick Parish Boundaries in the Pre-1861 Census Years," *Acadiensis* 6 (1977): 95-105; Graeme Wynn, "Population Patterns in Pre-Confederation New Brunswick," *Acadiensis* 10 (1981): 5-28; and Graeme Wynn, "Ethnic Migrations and Atlantic Canada: Geographical Perspectives," *Canadian Ethnic Studies/Etudes Ethniques au Canada* 18 (1986): 1-15.
- 9 Graeme Wynn, "A Province Too Much Dependent on New England," *The Canadian Geographer*, 31 (1987): 98-113; Graeme Wynn, "A Region of Scattered Settlement and Bounded Possibilities," *The Canadian Geographer* 31 (1987): 319-38; Graeme Wynn, "The Atlantic Realm," Plate 20, "Pre-Loyalist Nova Scotia," Plate 31, and "Maritime Canada, Late-Eighteenth Century," Plate 32, all in *Historical Atlas of Canada, Vol. I*, ed. R. C. Harris (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1987); and Graeme Wynn, "Timber Production and Trade to 2850," Plate 11, in *Historical Atlas of Canada, Vol. II*, ed. R. L. Gentilcore (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993).
- 10 Graeme Wynn, "The Maritimes: The Geography of Fragmentation and Underdevelopment," in *Heartland and Hinterland: A Geography of Canada*, ed. L. D. McCann (Scarborough, ON: Prentice-Hall, 1982), 156-213 (revised for 1998 editions); Graeme Wynn, "On the Margins of Empire, 1760-1840," in *The Illustrated History of Canada*, ed. R. Craig Brown (Toronto: Lester and Orpen Dennys, 1987/2012), 189-278; and Graeme Wynn, "Forging a Canadian Nation," in *North America: The Historical Geography of a Changing Continent*, eds. Robert Mitchell and Paul Groves (Totowa, NJ: Rowman and Littlefield, 1987), 373-409.
- 11 Graeme Wynn, "The Rise of Vancouver," in *Vancouver and Its Region*, eds. Graeme Wynn and Timothy Oke (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1992), 69-148.
- 12 Graeme Wynn, *Canada and Arctic North America: An Environmental History* (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-Clio Press, 2007).
- 13 Graeme Wynn and Donna McCririck, "Building 'Self-Respect and Hopefulness': The Development of Blue-Collar Suburbs in Vancouver," in *People, Places, Patterns, Processes: Geographical Perspectives on the Canadian Past*, ed. Graeme Wynn (Toronto: Dent, 1990), 267-84.